

The World They Inherited

Britons on both sides of the Atlantic believed that governing was the role of aristocrats and wealthy gentlemen. Political power came with economic power, with birth into the right social circles, and with influential connections.



Detail from "The Pageant," London, 1771

Courtesy of John Carter Brown Library at Brown University

Common people also had a limited role. Most common men who owned property could vote for a member of the lower house of their legislature. Voters could also serve on juries that enforced the law. Most did not qualify to participate in those ways, but free British subjects could petition their rulers with grievances in writing or with mass demonstrations or riots. They could seek justice in courts of common law, with juries of their peers.

King George III

George III became king of Great Britain and its colonies in 1760. American colonists saw themselves as his loyal subjects. They celebrated his birthday, drank toasts to his health, and fought in his American wars.



Plaster bust by L. Gahagan, 1809

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The Authority of Bishops

Men appointed as bishops of the established church sat in the British House of Lords alongside the great aristocrats of the realm, joining the authority of church and state.



Portrait of William Bateman, Bishop of Norwich, by John Faber Sr., early 18th century
Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London

The Authority of Parliament



The House of Commons, lower house of Parliament, depicted by Karl Anton Hickel, 1793
Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London

Parliament passed laws regulating trade within the empire, while routine taxes and legislation were left to the legislature of each colony.

Anno Regni
GEORGI II.

R E G I S

Magnæ Britanniae, Franciæ, & Hiberniæ,

Decimo quinto & sexto.

At the Parliament begun and holden at *Westminster*,
the First Day of *December*, *Anno Dom.* 1741, in
the Fifteenth Year of the Reign of our Sovereign
Lord *GEORGE* the Second, by the Grace of
God, of *Great Britain, France, and Ireland*
King, Defender of the Faith, &c. being the First
Session of this present Parliament.



L O N D O N :

Printed by *Thomas Baskett* and *Robert Baskett*,
Printers to the King's most Excellent Majesty, 1742.

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The Authority of Governors



Portrait of Thomas Hutchinson by an unknown artist, after Edward Truman portrait, 1741
Loan from Massachusetts Historical Society

Thomas Hutchinson, portrayed here as a young man, served as governor of Massachusetts from 1771 to 1774. Appointed by the King, royal governors pursued policies favored by the British ministry. They enjoyed power to appoint officials to execute the law, as seen in this appointment of a justice of the peace. Yet many governors saw colonial governments as dangerously out of balance, with no hereditary aristocracy to support executive authority and too much power concentrated in the hands of the elected assembly. Hutchinson worried that popular power, or “the rule of the multitude,” would bring anarchy and dictatorship to the colonies.



GEORGE the Third,
By the Grace of GOD, of
Great-Britain, France, and
Ireland, KING, Defender
of the Faith, &c.

Fra Bernard To all unto whom these Presents shall
come, Greeting.

Know Ye, That We have assigned and con-
stituted, and do by these Pre-
sents assign, constitute and appoint, Our Trusty and
well beloved *William Silvester Esquire*
to be one of Our Justices to keep Our Peace in
the County of Cumberland, in our Province of the
Massachusetts Bay in New England

And to keep and cause to be kept, the Laws and Ordinances made for the Good of the
Peace and for the Conservation of the same, and for the Quiet, Rule and Government of
Our People in the said County, in all and every the Articles thereof according to the Force,
Form and Effect of the same, and to chastize and punish all Persons offending against
the Form of those Laws and Ordinances or any of them in the County aforesaid, as accord-
ing to the Form of those Laws and Ordinances shall be fit to be done; And to cause to
come before him the said *William Silvester* all those that shall break the
Peace, or attempt any Thing against the same, or that shall threaten any of our People
in their Persons, or in burning their Houses, to find sufficient Security for the Peace, and
for the good Behaviour towards Us and our People; and if they shall refuse to find such
Security, then to cause them to be kept safe in Prison until they shall find the same;
and to do and perform in the County aforesaid, all and whatsoever, according to the
Laws and Ordinances of our said Province, or any of them, a Justice of the Peace may
and ought to do and perform *and with other our Justices of the Peace in the*
County aforesaid (according to the Tenour of the
Commission to them granted) to enquire by the Oaths of good and lawful Men of our
said County, by whom the Truth may be the better known, of all and all manner of
Thefts, Trespasses, Riots, Routs and unlawful Assemblies whatsoever, and all and
singular other Misdeeds and Offences of which by Law Justices of the Peace in their
General Sessions may and ought to enquire, by whomsoever or howsoever done or per-
petrated, or which shall hereafter happen, howsoever to be done or attempted in the
County aforesaid, contrary to the Form of the Laws and Ordinances aforesaid, made for
the common Good of our Province aforesaid and the People thereof; *and with other*
our Justices of the Peace in the said County

(according to the Tenour of the Commission to them granted as aforesaid) to hear and
determine all and singular the said Thefts, Trespasses, Riots, Routs, unlawful Assemblies,
and all and singular other the Premises, and to do therein as to Justice appertaineth,
according to the Laws, Statutes and Ordinances aforesaid.

In Testimony whereof, We have caused the publick Seal of our Province of the
Massachusetts-Bay aforesaid, to be hereunto affixed: *Witness Francis Bernard*
Esq. Captain General and Governor in Chief of Our said Province,
at Boston. the Seventh day of March 1764. In the Fourth year of
our Reign

By his Excellency's Command
with the Advice and Consent of the Council
W. M. S.

The Authority of Gentlemen

Only wealthy gentlemen sat in the House of Commons, which represented “the people” of England. In the colonies, representatives elected to colonial legislatures were less wealthy, but most came from the upper ranks. “Men should dress suitable to their various ranks in life, whether as a magistrate, statesman, warrior, man of pleasure, &c. for the hair, either natural or artificial, may be dressed to produce in us different ideas in the qualities of men.” (D. Ritchie, *A Treatise on the Hair*, London, 1770)



Gentleman's wig

[View object record </collections/nmah_363898>](/collections/nmah_363898)

The Authority of Distinguished Families



Teapot, 1752

[View object record </collections/nmah_1050425>](/collections/nmah_1050425)

This teapot engraved with the Robinson family crest was made for Abigail Robinson of Newport, Rhode Island, around 1752. That year Robinson married John Wanton, son of the governor of Rhode Island. Silversmith Samuel Casey may have consulted a guide to family crests such as John Guillim's standard book, *A Display of Heraldry*. The book explained, "Esquires and Gentlemen, all [have] Ensigns of Coats of Arms and thereby are distinguished from the meaner people."



Book, "A Display of Heraldry," 1660

The Authority of the People



Cartoon, around 1764

This detail from “The Election, a Medley,” by Henry Dawkins, around 1764, shows qualified voters lined up to the right of the Philadelphia courthouse.

Courtesy of Library of Congress

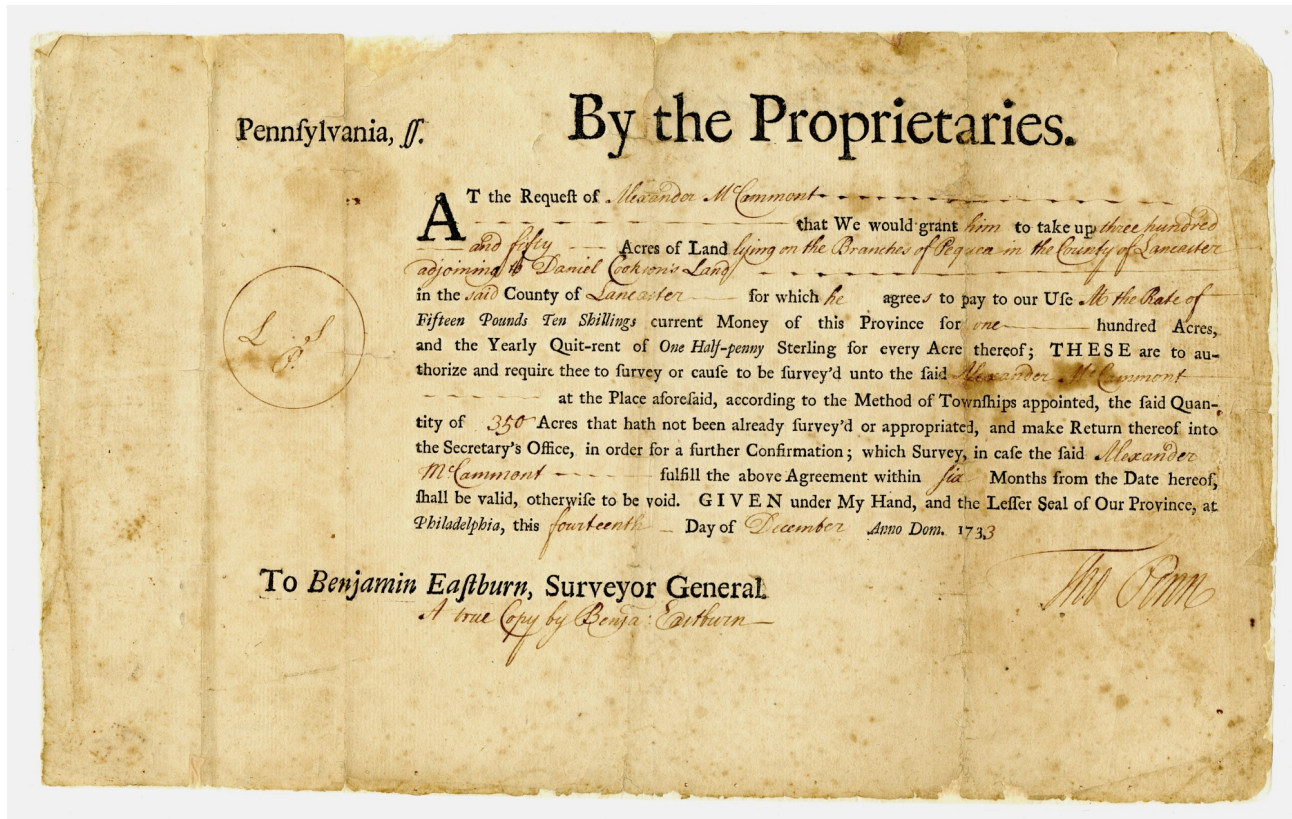
The House of Commons represented “the people” of England. By 1750, however, only about 17 percent of adult males in England were eligible to vote. In the colonies, more men owned enough property to qualify as voters than in England—an estimated 50 to 70 percent of adult free males in different colonies. Thanks to the availability of land, and more by circumstance than planning, colonial politics allowed broader participation.

At a Town Meeting May 22 1750
Lev^t Daniel Conant was chosen by the Major
Part of the Voters present to serve & Represent
the Town of Beverly at the Great & General
Court to be holden at Boston 30 May
At the same meeting Voted a Tax of Eighty
five pounds Lawfull money to pay the
Town Charges this present Year 1750 & to be
Levied & assessed on the Polls & Estates of
The Inhabitants of T. Town
At the same meeting Harbort Thordike
was Accepted of for a Const^{le} for the Medford
ward in the Name of William Hodsdon
It was put to Vote whether the Town would
mend the High way by arable & it past in
the Affirmative
Voted Relating to D Casey at West Beach
that it should be continued until the
next meeting
Voted that Del Israel Wood be & is Injourned
to Search the Records relating to the above
D Casey
Voted that the High Way down to the Mill
through Gayes Land shall be opened
Voted that Capt Henry Hornich William
Grover & Capt Jm^o Thordike be a Com^{tee}
with full power to act relating to the
opening of the High Way & to use all
Lawfull measures to effect the same
& to make report of there Doings at the
next March meeting
Voted that Capt Henry Hornich Wm Grover
& Capt Jm^o Thordike be a Com^{tee} with full
power to open the way down to Rogers
point & also the Landing on the Salt water
& to treat with the partners that adjoins

Town meeting record, Beverly, Massachusetts, recording the election of a representative to the legislature

Loan from City Clerk's Office, Beverly, Massachusetts

The Role of the Middling People

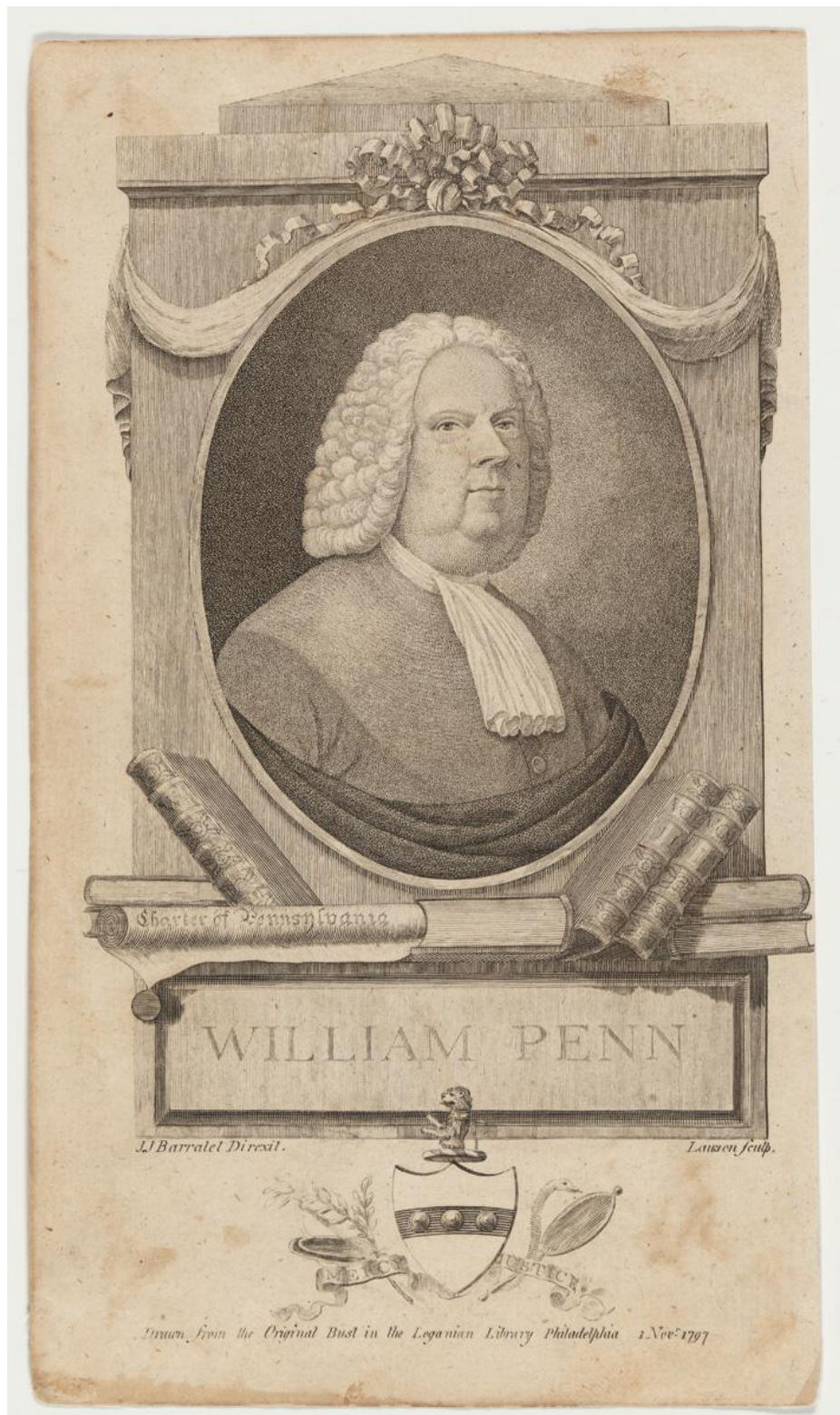


Land grant from Penn family, 1733

Gift of George Joseph Hummel

[View object record </collections/nmah_1591326>](#)

This land grant signed by Governor Thomas Penn deeded a large farm in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, to Alexander McCammont. Landowners and successful artisans made up the “middling sort” in colonial societies. There were also “the better sort” and “the poorer sort,” but the colonies had a higher percentage of “middling men” than Britain did. Since property owning bestowed political rights, those men became accustomed to a voice in colonial politics.



Engraving of Sir William Penn, by Alexander Lawson, 1797

Loan from National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution <https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_npg.77.92>



Map of Pennsylvania, by William Scull, 1770

Courtesy of Library of Congress

Hours & Admission

Open every day, except December 25, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Admission is free and no tickets are required.

Location & Contact

1300 Constitution Ave NW,
Washington, DC 20560 <<https://www.google.com/maps/place/smithsonian+national+museum+of+american+history/@38.8912835,-77.0322449,17z>>

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